

Kent's European Relationship Select Committee

Written Evidence – Tourism / Visitor Economy

According to two leading studies, one by Deloitte with VisitBritain and one by Trajectory for VisitEngland, tourism is currently the most vibrant and productive industry in the UK.

The tourism and hospitality sector provides 64,000 jobs in Kent and is worth £3.4bn to the local economy annually. It has the potential to grow and offer even more jobs and economic benefit in the future, indeed, tourism is forecast to grow by at least 3% per annum over the coming 5 years and Kent is performing above average in the sector when compared to the national average. The Paramount proposal for the Swanscombe Peninsula is a prime example of future opportunity that will demand a high number of qualified staff that we would ideally want to see recruited from within the County.

KCC's tourism services are provided through and with Visit Kent Ltd which is a public private partnership destination management organisation which has run for more than a decade. It is recognised locally and nationally for its innovative and sustainable operation which has seen it go from strength to strength where other local and regional organisations have struggled or even fallen by the wayside in the recent recession.

An essential part of Visit Kent's success and sustainability has been as a result of securing significant and regular European funding to support its numerous projects and campaigns promoting the county and its tourism businesses at home and abroad which has maximised the benefit of KCC and other public and private sector investment. Since 2002, Visit Kent has secured over £6m from Europe which has in turn leveraged match funding bringing investment in the Kent tourism economy of around £13m.

Specifically, EU funded projects have enabled Visit Kent to undertake research projects, regeneration initiatives, and projects specific to the rural tourism economy and directly related to sports and culture in 2012 to maximise the benefit of the London Olympics to Kent. Such funding has also enabled Visit Kent, often in partnership with other UK bodies and major cross-Channel carriers and more recently KLM to develop strong working relationships with similar bodies in target markets in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany.

It has also enabled it to further develop its marketing, business support, training and product development and to invest in core infrastructure such as a new website and to develop new approaches to initiatives such as the Greeters programme and the very successful Big Weekend.

As the EU comes to the conclusion of its Interreg IV funding programme we anticipated a drop in income from this area whilst we await the next programme launch, however, Visit Kent has continued to bid for and is securing unspent funding under what are known as 'cluster' projects. This has only been possible because Visit Kent, working closely with colleagues in

the International Team and Brussels Office, are well attuned to EU funding mechanisms and, crucially, plan ahead in preparation of opportunities that match business need.

EU funding has also enabled the nurturing of strong and on-going relationships with our near neighbours in the Nord Pas de Calais and West Flanders and an example of a current project is to provide training for French teachers on what there is to see and do in Kent when choosing to visit here with their students.

The benefits for KCC and Visit Kent in this area are the additional funding that is directly secured and how this enables leverage of additional investment from partners to deliver key initiatives. It also provides the opportunity to share best practice with sector professionals and organisations in the UK and near Europe which also helps to keep our visitor economy in tune with market trends and opportunities.

The challenges include the need to maintain a strong commitment to attracting such funding which can take a significant amount of time in each instance as well as the need to have robust 'return on investment' models in place to ensure that the effort remains. That said, even taking into account the administrative costs it still makes an important contribution to the bottom line and enables delivery of what Visit Kent needs to do in support of Kent's visitor economy.

A key lesson learned and adhered to is that EU funding pursued must continue to be for core objectives only as identified in Visit Kent's business plan and where agreed in its SLA and future contractual arrangements with KCC. Another is that there is strong and well founded expertise within Visit Kent and KCC's team which can be used to support others in this area where it is in our interest to do so. Finally, forward planning is essential so that all players are able to influence and inform EU funding programmes as they develop and to then be in a position to bid and secure funding with the required partnerships in place. KCC, through its International Team, is, for example, represented on the EU Programme Preparation Group (PPG) drafting the new Interreg 2-Seas cross-border programme 2014-20 in order to ensure that our priorities are appropriately reflected.

In looking ahead, there is likely to be increased competition for the new funding programmes as we see an increase in the number of EU partners wanting to take advantage of such funding. Projects, including tourism related ones, will also increasingly need to demonstrate a clear impact on economic growth and job creation. Kent and its constituent organisations and partners need to maintain its strong track record and reputation of excellent delivery, effective reporting and successful outcomes which will be achieved if there remains the commitment to close partnership working, early engagement and shared knowledge and professionalism

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